

Opposition leader says clashes in Kingston result of political plan to turn public opinion

BY MURRAY CAMPBELL

Jamaican opposition leader Edward Seaga says the violence that has killed at least 23 people since the weekend was inspired by the government of Prime Minister P. J. Patterson.

Mr. Seaga said yesterday that gun battles between residents of impoverished neighbourhoods of Kingston ended Sunday and have been replaced by a "lockdown" in which security forces have fired indiscriminately and kept people confined to their homes.

He said the death toll includes several elderly people, including four who died because they could not leave their homes to get medical attention.

"What the government has been trying to do is to pass this off as a rivalry situation between gangs," Mr. Seaga, a former prime minister of Jamaica, said in a telephone interview from Kingston, the capital. "Not so at all; it is a straight situation between the government forces and the communities."

Backed by helicopter gunships, soldiers deployed in a troubled Kingston neighbourhood yesterday and for a second night patrolled streets blocked with debris from days of gun battles between police and government opponents.

"Anyone who tried to move got shot at. It's pure murder from both ends . . . the police and the gangs," said Claudia McKay, a 23-year-old seamstress.

The victims include a police officer who was stoned to death yesterday by a crowd in Trelawny, northwest of the capital.

On Monday, Mr. Patterson called on the army to help police restore calm on the Caribbean island. His officials portrayed the security offensive as an attempt to stop two

Jamaican PM blamed for violence



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TOMAS van HOUTRYVE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Soldiers monitor a troubled neighbourhood in Kingston, Jamaica, yesterday after four days of gun battles between police and government opponents left 23 people dead. The victims include a police officer who was stoned to death by a crowd yesterday.

months of violence between gangs with rival political loyalties.

"The government cannot stand idly by and allow criminal elements to hold this country to ransom," he told reporters on Monday.

Mr. Seaga portrayed the situation differently, saying the Prime Minister simply panicked at the prospect of losing an election that has to be called by the end of next year.

He said his own Jamaican Labour Party has a 16-point lead in the polls over Mr. Patterson's People's National Party and that the government thought it could turn public opinion by engineering a situation that showed JLP supporters

in a bad light.

"This was hoped to be the window of opportunity," Mr. Seaga said. "In other words, if this turned public opinion against us, they would go to elections immediately. The fact is that it is backfiring."

He noted that there had been gunfire coming from neighbourhoods loyal to Mr. Patterson but that no security forces have conducted raids there.

Comments by Mr. Patterson dispute the charge that the unrest is politically linked. "The wave of violence has nothing to do with political persuasions," he said Monday. "It is a brazen challenge to the se-

curity forces by criminal elements to put the country in unrest."

Jamaica's political history is intertwined with the gangs that the two main parties helped organize and arm in Kingston's poor neighbourhoods in the 1970s. The well-armed gangs created what has come to be known as "garrison politics" by controlling the streets and intimidating voters at election time.

The gangs have turned to the lucrative drug trade, but most retain political allegiances.

The latest outbreak began on Saturday when police moved into Kingston's Tivoli Gardens area to hunt down illegal weapons.

In Ottawa, a spokesman for the Department of Foreign Affairs said yesterday that Canada was monitoring the situation in Jamaica but had not issued any travel advisories and that Canada has not been asked to assist Jamaica in quelling the violence.

Valarie Steele, president of the Toronto-based Jamaican-Canadian Association, said yesterday that the focus should be on "where Jamaicans are getting that kind of firepower. In Jamaica, we do not have a gun factory so where are the guns coming from?"

With a report from Associated Press